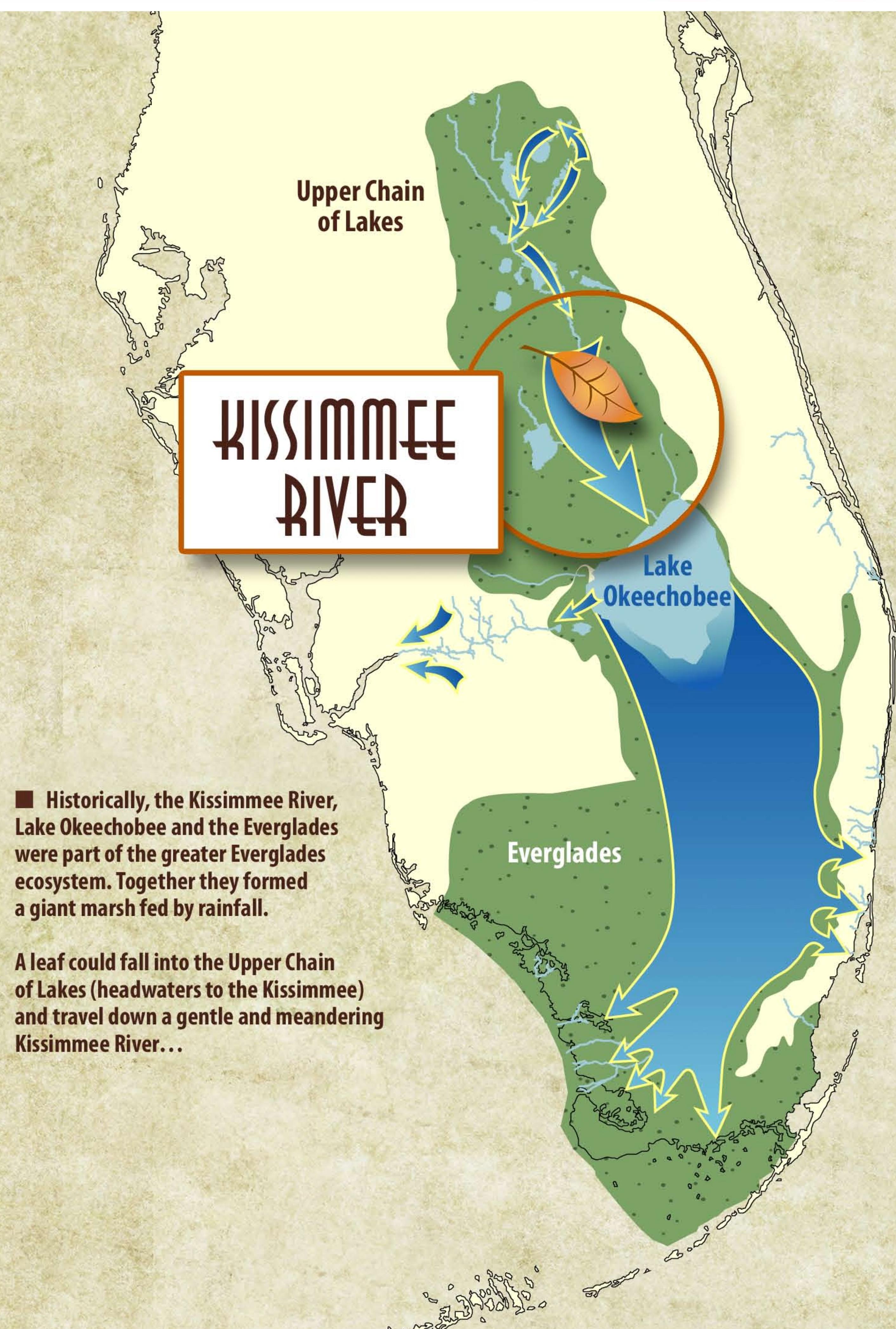


KISSIMMEE • okeechobee • everglades



The Kissimmee River once wove within a one- to two-mile wide floodplain. A wet corridor fed by rainfall, it connected the Upper Chain of Lakes with Lake Okeechobee.

In its natural state, the Kissimmee River rose out of Central Florida's Chain of Lakes and snaked its way through a 103-mile course before emptying into Lake Okeechobee, a straight-line distance of only 50 miles. In times of drought, the Kissimmee River would shrink into an unnavigable stream. When rainfall was plentiful, the entire river floodplain would become a broad sheet of fresh water flowing southward to Lake Okeechobee.

The River Becomes a Canal

In the wake of drought followed by hurricanes, Central Florida communities sought to balance the river's fluctuating waters. From 1962 to 1971, the federal Central and Southern Florida Project carved a 56-mile long, 30-foot deep drainage canal through the river's floodplain. It became well drained and dry, providing ranchland and farmland as well as home sites for Florida residents and winter tourists.

The Birds Disappear

As the wetland habitat disappeared, so did migratory waterfowl and wading birds. Scientists and engineers began studying the possibility of restoring all or part of the old river system to revive lost ecological values, and they concluded it could be achieved. The U.S. Congress authorized a joint state-federal project in 1992 to restore the river.

Bringing Back the River

By backfilling the canal, recarving new river channels and removing water control structures, the river is successfully being restored. Water is once again flowing through traditional river channels and spilling out onto floodplains. Birds and native vegetation are rebounding. Nature's force is bringing the Kissimmee River back to the majestic wetland system it once was.



A close-up of Spanish moss, which drapes oak trees along the banks of the Kissimmee River. This threadlike hanging plant is not a true moss, but a member of the pineapple family.



Once in steep decline, sportfishing has rebounded in the natural habitat of the restored river channel.

